

FURTHER NOTES ON BIRDS ABOUT SIMLA

BY

HUGH WHISTLER, F.L.S., F.Z.S.

In Vol. xxvi of the Journal, pages 770-775, I recorded a series of observations made about Fagoo near Simla in 1918 and followed it up in Vol. xxvii, pages 94-111, with a further series of notes made in 1919 in Simla. As it was my good fortune to be posted as Superintendent of Police, Simla, for the season of 1925 and as there is no likelihood that I shall ever visit the Simla Hills again, I take this opportunity of setting on record the more interesting of my notes made in that year. I arrived at Simla on February 6, 1925 and left it again on October 23 of the same year. Before the season started I was able to make short tours to Sabathu, Dagshai and Solon from February 27 to March 4 and to Narkunda, Koteghar and Kotekhai in the second half of March. For the rest of the time I was confined to Simla or localities within reach of a day's expedition.

Nucifraga hemispila, Vigors. The Himalayan Nutcracker.

Common from about 6,000-9,000' in the hills behind Simla as near as Mashobra and Mahasoo but not observed in Simla itself. I found it very common and in pairs about Narkundah from March 13 to 16 and found a nest on March 16 built in the branches of a pine close to the trunk at no great height from the ground. One bird was sitting in the nest and both made a great fuss when I examined it, so I was surprised to find that it contained a single dead chick. Both sexes apparently take part in incubation.

The flight is very similar to that of a Jay—very flapping with rounded wings and the same rather hesitating manner combined with fair speed.

Stachyridopsis pyrrhops (Blyth). The Red-billed Babbler.

A few pairs were seen at Sabathu when I was there from February 23 to 27. One was seen at Kotekhai on March 20, a pair were seen at 7,000' in the Chirot Nala, Mahasoo on June 14.

Cephalopyrus flammiceps flammiceps (Burton). The Fire Cap.

On March 21, two flocks were met with in some willows in the Giri Valley above Parala; they were singing a low twittering song rather like a feeble version of the song of the Goldfronted Serin (*Serinus pusillus*).

It was reported as first seen in Simla on March 27 and on April 1 a pair were found building near Snowdon. This nest contained four rather incubated eggs on April 21.

On May 8 I found a pair feeding well-grown young in 7,500' on Jakko. The nest was in a hole in an Oaktree trunk about 20' from the ground.

Horeites pallidus pallidus, Brooks. The Pale-bush Warbler.

Several were observed about Kotekhai in the Giri Valley on March 20-21 and the song was also heard there once.

This species breeds in fair numbers about 8,000' at Mahasoo and Kufri and from May to August the characteristic song may be freely heard in the thick undergrowth that clothes the hillsides wherever the larger forest trees have been cut. It is probably double brooded as on August 9 I found a brood of newly fledged young clicking and skulking in a rough patch of cover in the cultivation above the Kufri bazaar.

Sturnus vulgaris poltaratzkyi, Finsch. Finsch's Starling.

A solitary female of this species was found about three miles below Kotekhai in the Giri Valley on March 19. It was in poor plumage and was consorting with Common Mynahs.

Acridotheres tristis (L.). The Mynah.

Common at Dagshai 5,000' and Sabathu in February, at 7,200' at Koteghar in March and at Kotekhai in March.

Tarsiger chrysæus whistleri, Ticehurst. The Golden Bush-Robin.

A female was found at about 6,500' in the Chirot Nala on March 29.

Oreocincla mollissima simlajensis, S-B. The Plain-backed Mountain-Thrush.

I shot a male on Jakko at 8,000' on February 14; another Mountain-Thrush seen the same day and on February 11 also on Jakko was probably of the same species.

Carpodacus thurus blythi (Biddulph). The White-browed Rose-Finch.

I shot an immature male (in the plumage resembling that of the female) at 8,000' Kufri on February 22, 1925. It was a solitary bird and was feeding on the ground in a light sallow thicket on the top of the Kufri ridge. This appears to be the first record of this species in the Punjab Province.

Callacanthus burtoni (Gould). The Red-browed Finch.

I saw a male on February 17 and two females on February 18, in both cases feeding on the bank above the mall close to Gorton Castle. A flock of about thirty were seen by a friend on March 1, feeding by the side of the cartroad below the Cecil Hotel. These birds are very tame and have the movements on the ground of a heavy sparrow.

Serinus pusillus (Pallas). The Gold-fronted Serin.

On February 27, I found a flock on the cartroad about a mile from Sabathu. From March 19 to 21, I met with some parties in the Giri Valley between Parala and Kotkhai. A single bird was heard at 6,000' on the southern face of Tara Devi by the cartroad on April 10.

Fringilla montifringilla, L. The Brambling.

I have now to recant the former opinion expressed by me in the Journal (Vol. xxx, p. 410) that there must be some mistake about Jerdon's record that the Brambling occurred at Simla.

On December 13, 1924, Mr. A. E. Jones obtained a female in his garden at Marston Grange (7,000').

Then on February 15 and 22, I met personally with several in the cultivation at 8,000' above Kufri bazaar. They were in company with the flocks of *Stoliczka's* Mountain-Finch that were common on the hillside amongst the snow and owing to the restless behaviour of the latter species were hard to obtain when with them. However, the Bramblings at times liked to rest quietly in the leafy boughs of the Mountain Oaks and were then easy to approach.

When I visited the same place on March 10, I could only find a single female in a huge flock of the Mountain Finches.

In all I obtained five specimens.

Æthopyga gouldiæ (Vigors). Mrs. Gould's Sunbird.

On April 5, I saw a brilliant adult male in the Chirot Nala at about 6,500'; it was hovering in the undergrowth apparently collecting spiders threads for its nest and then dashed away into the forest out of sight. The call is a note like the rapid opening and closing of a pair of scissors as in the case of *Æ. siparaja*. Near the same spot on July 12, I shot two young males. They were moving about some parasitic plants at the top of a lofty oak tree, turning incessantly from side to side and uttering the same scissor's note.

Dicaeum ignipectum (Hodgson). The Fire-breasted Flowerpecker.

On February 24-25, I found several of these little birds about Sabathu Cantonment.

Dryobates hyperythrus (Vigors). The Rufous-bellied Pied Woodpecker.

A male was seen in the pine woods of Narkundah at 9,000' on March 16.

Apus melba (L). The Alpine Swift.

A few Alpine Swifts were noted in the vicinity of Simla on various dates from April 11 to May 17.

On the autumn migration however they were observed in much larger numbers than is usual about Simla, and for a longer period; the first birds were seen on August 21 and the last on September 24; between those two dates I have records of flocks seen on sixteen different days, on some days in very large numbers.

Cacomantis merulinus passerinus (Vahl.) The Indian Plaintive Cuckoo.

I heard this little Cuckoo on July 15 calling in a valley about 5,500', below Kasumpti.

Strix aluco nivicola (Blyth). The Himalayan Wood-Owl.

On April 4 I found one of these delightful birds sitting in a holly oak bush near the ground and it allowed me to look at it from a distance of about 4 feet. It then flew off and settled near the ground in another tree. This was at 7,800' on Jakko where the species may be heard calling at nights.

On July 12 I found two adults sitting in the undergrowth of wattle bushes at 7,300' by the private road in the Chiro't Nullah.

Strix indranee indranee (Sykes). The Brown Wood-Owl.

Only observed on one occasion (April 16) in a nullah just above Annandale in the late afternoon.

Otus spilocephalus (Blyth). The Spotted Himalayan Scops-Owl.

The characteristic call of this little owl was heard in the grounds of Vice-regal Lodge on October 21.

Glaucidium brodiei (Burton). The Collared Pigmy Owlet.

This Pigmy Owlet must be quite common in and about Simla and the neighbouring hills as I heard it calling on various dates from February 20 to May 17 after which the call was not heard. A female was shot at Dagshai 5,700' on March 2 and I observed it up to 9,000' at Narkunda. It calls both by day and night, and is active by daylight.

Torgos calvus (Scop). The King-Vulture.

Observed as follows:—February 27 Dharpore, March 2 Dagshai, March 3 Solon, March 8 over Tara Devi and Simla W., March 10 beyond Sanjouli, March 18, Theog, April 5 by the Tollbar. After that it was not seen.

Pseudogyps bengalensis (Gm.) The White-backed Vulture.

Observed as follows:—March 2 Dagshai, March 8 two or three on Tara Devi, May 10 about Naldera.

Gypaëtus barbatus hemachalanus, Hutton. The Lämmergayer.

On September 24 an adult Lämmergayer was brought in to Mr. A. E. Jones by some hill men, who declared that they had caught it in some telegraph wires. Although we could detect no sign of injury it was very quiet in demeanour sitting passively on the floor, a little inclined to bite if molested but otherwise still and silent; it kept the head rather lowered and the mouth a little open. If uninjured it may have felt conscious of the hopelessness of opening its huge wings for flight in the restricted area of the room. Mr. Jones kindly allowed me to present this bird to the Society and its portrait appears in our Journal (Vol. xxxi, 198).

Hieraëtus fasciatus (Vieill). Bonelli's Eagle.

Bonelli's Eagle was seen from the railway between Solon and Tara Devi on March 2. Single birds, apparently of this species, were seen soaring over the Hotel Cecil on March 9 and by Parala in the Giri Valley on March 21.

Spilornis cheela (Latham). The Crested Serpent Eagle.

Occasionally observed about the catchment area from April to July.

Ictinaëtus malayensis perniger (Hodgson). The Black Eagle.

As there is little on record regarding this fine Eagle in the Western Himalayas it seems worth while recording my experience of it in detail.

On March 14 and 16 I saw an Eagle, which was almost certainly of this species, soaring about Sidhpur 8,500'–9,000' between Koteghar and Narkunda, and on the latter date it also flew over Narkunda.

What was perhaps another was seen on May 10 near the Retreat, Mashobra.

On June 28 I had a splendid view of one hunting in the bottom of the Chiro't Nala (catchment area) at about 7,000'. It was very dark in appearance, save for a light area in the primaries and the marked bars on the tail. The yellow at the base of the beak was very noticeable. It was a wonderful flier covering the sides of the nullah in circular beats, practically without flapping the wings. The wings and tail looked very broad and rounded, the primaries spreading out like the fingers of a hand.

On August 16 I secured a fine male at Kufri 8,000'. This was in complete moult with the organs very indistinct. In the crop was a naked nestling of

some passerine bird, apparently *Trochalopteron lineatum* and in the stomach incubated eggs of a Laughing Thrush either *T. variegatum* or *T. erythrocephalum*. It seems fair therefore to assume that the marvellous powers of flight are devoted in the summer months chiefly to bird nesting and that as the Eagle quarters the hillsides it is scanning the bushes for nests. This is the only specimen of the Black Eagle I have ever secured personally and the thrill that the incident afforded will perhaps excuse the inclusion of the following extract from my diary :—

“ We emerged out of the forest on to a bare spur and looked down into the head of the nullah which lay below us a thousand feet, breaking up into numerous side ravines, partly clothed in forest, and partly bare or clothed with undergrowth, in places almost precipitous. There, far below us was a Black Eagle which was hunting over the trees and undergrowth in regular beats, backwards and forwards, sailing in and out of the nullahs and contours with the utmost ease and grace. This he was doing in the head of the main nullah, and then he started to beat up the side towards where we were resting, after one false alarm in which he started towards our side and then returned to the main nullah. I told my companions to remain absolutely still without moving hand or foot as we were out in the open as the Eagle worked along the sides of the nullah, quartering the ground backwards and forwards but all the while gradually advancing in our direction, I saw that his course was steadily ascending and would probably bring him into the gap between some trees on my left. For a moment he went out of sight in a nullah so I hastily shifted a yard or two to cover that gap and waited with my 410 collecting gun (No. 8 shot) ready and cocked. In my new position I could no longer see the hillside and watch the progress of the bird but a minute or two later it suddenly sailed into the gap in front of me, and seeing me steered off to drift down hill. I fired and hit the bird which staggered and again recovered, and turning made off in the direction in which it had come; but it was obvious that it had been hard hit. We watched it keenly as it went, and it disappeared into the deodars that clothed a side nullah; however it did not reappear on the far side of the nullah, nor could we see it elsewhere. Obviously it had stopped in the nullah, so leaving Major C. to watch from our spur I made off down the hillside with my orderly Tulsi Ram as fast as might be consistent with caution.

I entered the deodars very quietly with gun ready loaded and every nerve on the *qui vive* to detect the wounded Eagle resting in a tree, or to hear the sound of small birds mobbing it. The sunlight and the shadow were very peaceful and quiet, and the only calls came from a large party of Grosbeaks in the trees and some Variegated Laughing Thrushes—but these all were obviously concerned only with their own affairs. There was no sign of my quarry. I passed through the nullah and emerged on to the ridge beyond and then signalled and shouted to Major C. perched on the spur above, with his handkerchief fluttering in the breeze to show his position. He replied that there was still no sign of the bird. Tulsi Ram and I then worked back into the nullah, taking different lines, and a welcome shout soon announced that Tulsi Ram had found the Eagle lying dead in a tree.”

Accipiter virgatus affinis, J. E. Gray. The Besra Sparrow-Hawk.

The late Mr. Basil-Edwards kindly allowed me to examine a beautiful adult male Besra that he shot at Simla 6,000', on June 28, 1925.

On June 18 I found a nest of the Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush at 8,000' on a pineclad slope of the Chiroi Nala. It contained two well-feathered chicks which as I looked at them dashed out of the nest and down the hillside. At once there was an agitated skirmish which resolved itself into the parent Rock-Thrushes trying to save the chicks from a tiny hawk, which dashed at them in a most determined manner regardless of my presence and successfully carried one of them off. This Hawk could only have been the adult male of this species, and I saw what was probably the same bird at the bottom of the nullah on July 12.

Falco peregrinator, Sund. The Shahin Falcon.

In March I found a pair of Shahins frequenting the face of a mountain close to Simla and on April 10 I discovered what was evidently the site of their eyrie in a precipice; it was however quite inaccessible. The same birds or others were seen over Simla occasionally in June and July.

Falco subbuteo, L. The Hobby.

During the summer months the Hobby is distinctly scarce in the neighbourhood of Simla and I did not hear of it until May 7, when one was reported as seen flying over the Ridge. It does however breed in the vicinity, as will be seen from the following account taken from my diary :—

“On the evening of June 17, 1925, I went out to examine a certain ridge near Simla, on which the Hobby Falcon has been known to breed for at least 10 or 12 years. The upper slopes of this ridge, looking towards the S. W. are broken by small nullahs, and covered with a fairly thick growth of Deodar forest, of no great age.

I started towards the top of the hill and commenced to work downwards in hopes of finding the whereabouts of the Hobbies. I had not gone far before I heard the screaming of a Falcon below me and was able to track it into a small nullah filled with Deodars. I accordingly took up a position on the ridge at one side of the nullah and settled to watch. It was not long before I made out a Hobby sitting in a Deodar tree where it was calling and after a short time the other bird also appeared. Both Hobbies were very noisy screaming at intervals the plaintive rising *tee—tee—tee—tee* which is common to most of the Falcons, and varying it occasionally with a harsh single note *pit pit* or *chip chip chip* uttered two or three times in succession. They kept on flying about in circles, sometimes over the trees, sometimes amongst them and often low over the ground, settling here and there on different trees.

One of the Hobbies was carrying something in its talons—apparently a small bird—which it eventually ate on a Deodar.

This behaviour went on for sometime and I then left the place without disturbing the birds.

There was no doubt from their excitement that they were preparing to breed, and I noticed a crow's nest in very good condition which seemed a likely nest for them to use, though they did not directly approach it while I was there. It was about 40' from the ground against the trunk of one of the Deodars overhanging a mule road that wound through the nullah. This spot is at an elevation of about 6,500'.

On June 24, 1925, I returned to the spot about 5 p.m. walking along the mule road and as I approached the site of the Crow's nest the little male Hobby was visible sitting on the topmost shoot of a tall Deodar about 20 yards away. He paid no attention to me and the female was not visible anywhere so I climbed up on to the ridge, where I had sat before, and made myself comfortable to watch.

The little Falcon was sitting there on his lofty perch in complete ease, looking over the wide valley that stretched before him with portions of Simla visible on the ridges across the other side. It was cool and pleasant with a bright sun and though he was sitting quite very much at his ease he was all the time on the alert, his head turning from side to side incessantly. After a time he started to stretch himself and show systems of preparing to move, then he flew off circled once in the air and disappeared over the ridge for his evening's hunting and I did not see him again.

I waited there for sometime longer but the female did not appear and nothing happened. Then I climbed along the hillside to a spot whence I could see onto the top of the crow's nest noted at my previous visit, and there was the female sitting in the nest, where she had obviously been all the time. So without disturbing her I went away determined to allow ample time for the eggs to be laid.

On June 27 I returned to take the eggs. As we arrived at the spot there was complete silence and the male could not be seen on any of the trees, nor from below could we distinguish any bird in the nest. I had a sinking feeling that something was wrong and that the prize was not to be mine : however I told Tuli Ram, my orderly, to go up the tree and he divested himself of his haversack and coat and started : he was not more than a quarter of the way up to the nest when the female Hobby flew out of the nest screaming once or twice and settled on a bough of a Deodar some 30 yards away. There she sat more or less unconcerned and took but little notice of the climber.

He reached the nest and reported three eggs and said that the nest was quite small and that there was no food lying about it. I told him to take the eggs and substitute for them a couple of hen's eggs, slightly smeared with mud to darken them, which we had brought for the purpose. This he did and des-

cended again. We then stayed on the road below the nest examining and packing the eggs but almost as soon as the climber was down the Hobby took to wing and flying in a circle round the nest tree settled in a neighbouring Deodar. This she repeated again, flying close to the hillside, and after one or two more short flights she returned to the nest and settled herself down in it on the hen's eggs.

We then climbed up to the usual knoll and settled there to watch ; the female Hobby was visible through the glasses sitting very deep in the nest cavity, her back below the line of the sides of the nest ; her head was a little higher but hardly able to see over the side, her tail projecting rather upwards over one side.

For a time nothing happened : then in the distance I heard the screaming call and the male Hobby appeared from out over the valley flying rapidly towards the site of the nest : as he approached it was evident that there was food in his talons and he circled once past the nest calling, while the female answered, and after that he settled on a neighbouring Deodar. Here he sat on a horizontal bough and I could see he was carrying the partially plumed body of a small bird. The female slipped off the nest and settled in another neighbouring Deodar. The male kept on calling sometimes a sharp *pit pit pit*, sometimes the familiar screaming call, while the female answered in the same way and flew from perch to perch. Then the male took the bird in his beak and the female flew on to the bough beside him, took it in her beak, transferred it to her claws and flew away and settled in the Deodars further up the nullah where we could not see her. The male relieved of his burden cleaned his beak against the bough, preened his feathers, and then settled himself to sit patiently on the bough.

In a comparatively short space of time the female re-appeared having eaten the bird ; she then took some exercise circling in the air and settling in the various trees, calling a good deal in the process while the male sat quietly in his place ; finally she flew down to the nest and settled on the edge of it where she stood looking about her ; then she stepped down into the egg cavity and stood there, and gradually settled down sometimes putting her head down to look at or move the eggs ; and before she finally was satisfied she changed her position in the nest by a half circle.

When she was definitely settled on the eggs, I went down and had the male flushed and shot him, as the specimen was required. His crop was empty but there were a few fragments of flesh and feather in the stomach probably eaten while pluming the bird he had brought for the female. The report of the gun brought the female off the nest calling but she settled at once in a neighbouring tree and ultimately returned to the nest in which we left her sitting. Two days later I sent the orderly to remove the hen's eggs and he reported that the female Hobby was not at the nest, so she probably had deserted it on finding that the male had vanished.

In October there was a most marked migration of Hobbies in the Simla Hills. On October 3 three were visible high over the Ridge at dusk. On October 9 one was reported to me and I saw a second bird that had been shot.

On October 11 Hobbies were visible in the Chirot Nullah all day on the wing most of the time. There were at least 5 and probably more. I noticed that while the bird was soaring the primaries slanted slightly downwards, almost below the level of the back, while the bird moved in curves and circles climbing and sinking at will in the air with scarcely an effort—an occasionally shifting of the angles of the wings and two or three rapid strokes of the wings now and again being all the effort involved. Thus the Hobby soared for a space, then there would be a burst of activity and the bird flew straight with regular rapid wing beats ; next followed a swift downward stoop of a hundred feet, and again the bird was rising swiftly without effort. Thus were the Hobbies feeding or playing all day long, backwards and forwards, up and down, over the steep bare hillsides and the deep cut ravines. I shot an adult and an immature bird ; both were exceedingly fat and the former had its crop stuffed with remains of insects, apparently cicadas.

After returning to Simla I saw two more Hobbies by the Grand Hotel in the evening.

On October 13 I saw one—or perhaps more—at dusk soaring high over Gorton Castle. On October 15 I saw two at dusk high over Snowdon. The same

evening there were said to be about a dozen over Mashobra and one was shot and sent to me to substantiate the record.

These birds must have moved on immediately as on October 18 I saw none in the course of a long day over towards Kufri, though the next evening at dusk saw a single bird over the Ridge.

Arboricola torqueola millardi, Stuart Baker. The Hill-Partridge.

I attribute to this species a characteristic call of the Simla hills, a very gentle melancholy *poor* or *pheaw*, which at closer quarters sounds more like *quaaw*; it is uttered singly at short intervals and the sound carries for a long distance, being audible throughout a whole nullah. This call may be heard from 6,000 to 8,000' in the Simla hills throughout May and June and the first half of July and occasionally at other times. If my attribution is correct the Hill-Partridge must be fairly common, though I only occasionally flushed a pair on forest-clad hillsides.